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Hidden Children in France (1940-1944): A Memoir

By Joseph Sungolowsky

My younger brother Leon and I are the sons of the late Rabbi Aron Gerson Sungolowsky and Esther Berger. We were born in Charleroi, Belgium, where my father was the rabbi of a small Jewish community. When Belgium was invaded by the Nazis on May 10, 1940, my family, consisting of my maternal grandfather, aged 80, my parents, my older sister Fina, my brother and me, fled on a train to France. We had hoped to escape the continuous bombardment by the German air force, but our train was bombed in a city called Lop, close to the Belgian-French border. We came to a stop and the passengers were ordered to seek refuge in the nearby countryside. Since it would be difficult for my grandfather to move about, my father decided that we would all stay on the train.

There were many victims among those who ran off, but miraculously, we were all saved and arrived in Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule, a village near Vichy, France. We were welcomed by French rescue organizations and first housed in an old-age home and later in a barn. We lived in that village for about a month, and I attended public school.

My father contacted the Jewish community in Vichy and we moved there. We were housed at the Charmel Hotel, which served as headquarters for the ORT, the world organization devoted to rehabilitation, and the OSE, another organization dedicated to the rescue of refugee children. I remember prominent members' names: Dr. Frumkin, Dr. Aron Singalowski, president of World ORT (who turned out to be a distant relative), and Mr. and Mrs. Lourié. At the same time, Vichy was a meeting place for many Jews seeking to escape the German invasion of northern France. Among them was the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory.

In June 1940, France surrendered to the Germans. With the establishment of the collaborationist government of Marshal Pétain in Vichy, all foreigners were forced to leave the city. In August 1940, we moved to Nice, in unoccupied France.

My father was employed by the Ashkenazi community, located on the Boulevard Dubouchage. As foreigners, we had to renew our residence permits periodically at police headquarters, yet life went on fairly normally. We attended French schools,

and our Jewish education was handled by my father and tutors. My maternal grandfather, Abraham Berger, who had fled Nazi Austria in 1938, passed away in 1941 and is buried in the Jewish cemetery of Caucade in Nice. When, in the summer of 1942, the Vichy government instituted anti-Jewish legislation and the French police began to round up Jews, my family went into hiding in a basement room. My father contacted the OSE, hoping to find a safer hiding place for my brother and me. There



Joseph, right, with his brother, Leon, at the Pension Bon Accueil in Villard-de-Lans, France, 1944.

was even talk of children's transports to the United States, which my father welcomed, but my brother and I did not want to be separated from the family.

As the rest of France was occupied by the Germans, Italy claimed historic rights to Nice and its surroundings, and the area was overtaken by the Italian army. The Italian authorities turned out to be unofficially sympathetic to the plight of the Jews and they extended their protection to them.¹ We were then able to return to our apartment.

When the Italian army surrendered to the Allied Forces in Italy, in September 1943, Nice became occupied by the Germans. Massive roundups of Jews by the Gestapo began to take place on a daily basis. This time, we became separated. My parents knew an elderly widow named "Cousine Rose" who agreed to hide them. My brother and I were taken by a non-Jewish lady, Madame Aymard.

Madame Aymard, who collected ivory heads representing various human types, soon became conscious of our "Jewish look."

One evening, she frightened us with the news that the Gestapo was searching the building for Jews. They never came to the door and I am still wondering whether she had fabricated the story. Despite her good will, she felt that the situation was becoming too dangerous. After a brief stay with her, she told us that different arrangements would have to be made for us.

My sister, who had been a member of the Nice section of the Zionist Youth in the previous years, had maintained contact with friends who had become members of the Jewish Fighters Organization, a resistance group. They referred her to the Nice section of the OSE who agreed to take charge of my brother and me. This organization was directed by Moussa Abadi (a.k.a. Monsieur Marcel) and by a physician, Dr. Odette Rosenstock (a.k.a. Mademoiselle Delatre), who became his wife after she came back from deportation. They were working closely with Monseigneur Paul Rémond, the bishop of Nice, who devoted himself to the rescue of Jewish children and adults. I remember people saying that the bishopric headed by Monseigneur Rémond was under surveillance by the Gestapo.

I have a vivid memory of the saintly Monseigneur Rémond. Shortly before my parents went into hiding, my mother had asked to meet with him to obtain his help in finding a hiding place and she took me along to see him. He received us very warmly at the bishopric located at the villa Dupanloup in Nice and he vowed to do his utmost to help us. I remember that after the Liberation my father was part of a delegation of Jewish community leaders in Nice who expressed their gratitude to Monseigneur Rémond for his exemplary devotion on behalf of the Jews during the Nazi occupation of Nice.²

The OSE placed my brother and me with a couple who owned "Cottage Bellevue," a villa in the Cimiez section of Nice. She was Madame Lemas; he was Monsieur Paul. Officially, the villa was a boarding-house for younger children. Besides us, there was indeed a young non-Jewish girl who was occasionally visited by her parents. However, we soon discovered that the couple was also housing two Jewish families, Mr. and Mrs. Rosenbaum, their daughter and her fiancé, Mr. Geshwind,

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and an elderly couple named Bialistok, six people in all.

After a few weeks, the owners of the villa decided it would be safer for these families to sleep in an unfinished and unventilated basement, accessible only through a wooden trap door. Monsieur Paul and Mr. Geshwind replaced the trap with another, made out of cement, so as to eliminate the hollow noise that could be heard when one walked on it. Should the Gestapo arrive unexpectedly during the night, it would be closed immediately and a carpet rolled over it. Somehow, when the Jewish families began to sleep in the basement, my brother and I left the children's pavilion and joined them. But the families could not take the lack of minimal comfort and returned to their rooms. We, too, then returned to the pavilion.

At the "Cottage Bellevue," we were treated rather severely, especially by Monsieur Paul. I had a vague idea of my parents' hiding place without knowing the exact address. On a Sunday morning, I decided to go to the section of town where I thought it might be. After several inquiries, people directed me to Cousine Rose. My parents were frightened by my unexpected visit, which might have proved dangerous for them. Nevertheless, they were happy to see me and welcomed me tearfully. I spent the afternoon with them.

Before leaving for the villa, my mother gave me a bag of grape jam sandwiches. Because she had made the jam herself, those sandwiches were very precious to me. To make them last longer, I hid the bag on a shelf in the closet of the pavilion. Monsieur Paul found them the next day and asked me about this stash. To avoid further questioning, as well as his wrath for bringing in food from the outside, I told him that I knew nothing about it. He immediately disposed of my treasured sandwiches.

A few weeks after that event, in October 1943, we were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by Madame Lemas. She told us that the Gestapo had arrived on the premises to pick up the Jewish families she was hiding. She told us to pretend to be fast asleep during their search and she left. Once again, we were extremely frightened. A few moments later, she returned to the pavilion accompanied by the Gestapo agents. I could see them through my half-closed eyes. She picked up the little girl who had awakened in tears and told the Nazi policemen that the lit-

tle girl and we were "her children" and that we could not be touched. They flashed their lights into our faces, opened a back door that led to the street to make sure that no one was escaping and left the pavilion without any further verification. An open miracle had occurred.

When I woke up the next morning the Jewish families were gone except for old Mrs. Bialistok who had been deemed unfit to be transported. My sister who visited us from time to time happened to come by that day. I told her what had happened. She immediately contacted the representatives of the OSE. Shortly thereafter, they came to pick us up lest the Gestapo return. I learned that they did come back, as was their practice, to pick up the belongings of the Jews they had arrested.

After the Liberation, Mrs. Bialistok, who survived, accused Madame Lemas of having informed the Gestapo about the Jewish families she was hiding. Charges were brought against her and I was called to testify before an investigating magistrate. I was shown a line-up of arrested Gestapo agents but I did not recognize anyone. I merely retold the events as I had lived them. I never learned the outcome of the case and never knew whether Mrs. Bialistok's accusations were justified or not.

We were taken to the Collège Sasserio, a Catholic boarding school in Nice. Coincidentally, it was located near the now deserted apartment where we had lived. I was sad not to be able to return to our building but conscious of the reality of the situation. At school, the Fathers welcomed us and showed much sympathy for our plight.

After a stay of three weeks, the representatives of the OSE took us to the house of Madame Andrée-Pierre Viénot, called "La Messuguière" (an estate which serves to this day as a resort for literary and artistic celebrities), located in Cabris, a suburb of the city of Grasse. As I learned later, Madame Viénot was the wife of Pierre Viénot, a former deputy of the Ardennes, a minister in the government of the Third Republic and an aide to General De Gaulle who was the head of the French provisional government, first in Algiers and later in London. In 1943, General De Gaulle appointed him to be the ambassador of the French Committee of National Liberation to the British government.³

Madame Viénot showed us a quasi maternal affection. Evidently, she was herself a member of the Resistance movement since she became a member of the French National Assembly after the Liberation, a minister in the French government of the

Fourth Republic and, eventually, the mayor of Rocroi, a town in northern France. After staying with Madame Viénot for about a week, she told us that we were to be taken to a boarding house for children in Villard-de-Lans, a village located in the Vercors region near the French Alps. A few days later, Monsieur Saint-Luc, a gentleman of aristocratic origin and demeanor came to take us. We traveled by bus during the night. In the morning, we arrived in Grenoble and boarded another bus that took us to Villard-de-Lans. Amid the snow-covered mountains, we discovered a magnificent village where the children of well-to-do French families boarded. We had arrived at the "Pension Bon Accueil," directed by Monsieur and Madame Saint-Luc. We were given a new identity. Our names were now Joseph and Léon Baroux.

We adapted quickly and pleasantly to life at the *pension* or boardinghouse. We were well cared for and well-fed, which today may seem inconceivable because food was extremely scarce. Monsieur and Madame Saint-Luc did their utmost to minimize the differences between us and the other children. (There was one other Jewish boy by the name of Lucien Vélin who apparently had been placed there by his family rather than by the OSE). The Saint-Luc couple had also welcomed three Jewish female counselors. We were not as well-dressed as the other children and we attended the village public school while the others went to private schools, but mostly, we did not receive as much mail as the other children did, which made me very sad. The curriculum of the school I attended was intended for rural children. Expecting to enter the French Lycée the following year, I had to pass a government entrance exam for which this school did not prepare its students. Consequently, I did not take my studies seriously.

Monsieur Rey, the principal of the school, was a charming gentleman who was aware of our situation. He treated us with much kindness. Once, expecting an inspection that might prove dangerous, he dismissed us from school upon our arrival. On June 6, 1944, the day of the Allied landing in Normandy (D-Day), he cheerfully welcomed and encouraged us by saying that the war would soon come to an end.

At "Bon Accueil," the other children were told we were Protestant, and, therefore, not subject to any specific religious practices. Yet, we had brought along our Jewish prayer books. Madame Saint-Luc immediately took them from us. But she was apparently aware of the dates of the

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Jewish High Holy Days for she called us into her office and had us stay there so that we might recite our prayers.

Madame Viénot had written to us once or twice, but ceased all correspondence, leaving my letters unanswered. In later years, I realized that she may have been reluctant to call attention to herself because of her husband's high position in the Resistance and of her own underground activities, including helping to hide Jewish children as in our case. I then decided to violate one of the OSE's cardinal rules which forbade hidden children to correspond with their parents. Before leaving them, my parents had told me that if I ever wanted to contact them, I could write to a neighbor, Madame Tosti, who lived in our building, addressing her as "Dear Aunt." I did just that. Shortly thereafter, I was overjoyed to receive a letter bearing my father's handwriting. From then on, I corresponded with my parents. Constantly risking her life, as the Gestapo regularly came to look for us in the building, my older sister Fina, who had stayed with my parents, periodically came to pick up my letters from Madame Tosti. When the OSE representatives got wind of that arrangement, they severely reprimanded both my parents and my sister for continuing to correspond with us.

At "Bon Accueil," life continued to be pleasant. Yet, I was constantly worried about the fate of my parents. Cousine Rose no longer wanted to house them. They decided to move in with Rabbi Wolf Brum, his wife and their little boy, in a house located in the outskirts of Nice. I learned afterwards that, on his way to his new hiding place, my father, who had shaved off his beard, performed a circumcision on a newborn Jewish boy. With the Gestapo constantly cruising the streets of Nice in their black Citroën cars, looking to pick up Jews, their situation was very dangerous. Neither family felt safe in the new place. Rabbi Brum and his family decided to leave the area and move to the southwest of France. (My parents learned later that the family, father, mother and child were caught by the Nazis and shot on the spot.) My parents also thought of leaving. They wrote to me that they were planning to move to Lyon, which I thought to be an extremely dangerous decision. But they changed their minds and decided to stay in Nice.

I had my own childish worries, namely being unable to prepare for my Bar-Mitzvah,

which was to take place the following December. During the walks that we and our counselors took in the village, we often met Resistance fighters belonging to the famous unit known as "Maquis du Vercors" which was operating in the area. I felt much encouraged by their presence and we often heard the shootings between them and the soldiers of the Wehrmacht (the German army).

While walking on a summer's day, in August 1944, a Jeep filled with soldiers waving an American flag appeared in the village square. We were liberated!

For a period of six weeks, I was placed in a private summer school that allowed me to prepare for the Lycée entrance exam. To this day, I do not know who "financed" that project. I traveled to Grenoble to take the exam and passed it. On that occasion, I was especially happy to use my real last name for the first time since the Liberation.

In September, the *pension* emptied out as the children returned home. The director had received no instructions as to how we were to be reunited with our parents. We were told that we would go home at the first opportunity. My parents had indeed returned to the building we lived in before but, having abandoned their old apartment, they now had to rent a more expensive and less comfortable one.

Because of previous sabotage by the French Resistance, post-war transportation was difficult. Eager to return to my parents as fast as possible, I felt depressed. One morning, while walking in the village, I met a young acquaintance and asked him if, by chance, he knew how one could travel to Nice. Providentially, he told me that he knew a certain Monsieur Heurtain who was driving a truck to Nice the next morning. I rushed to tell Madame Saint-Luc about it. She immediately contacted Monsieur Heurtain, and he accepted to take us. The trip through the Napoleon Highway, which ordinarily took a few hours only, lasted about two and a half days. In the course of the trip, the truck had a flat tire. When we got off for the repair, another traveler, an elderly gentleman by the name of Mr. Van Cleff, who had been hiding in Villard-de-Lans and whom I knew by sight, made the following remark: "If only Hitler could burst just as that tire did!"

The truck dropped us off in Nice not far from where we lived. We ran there and, a few minutes later, we embraced our parents who had been wondering how they would be reunited with us.⁴

In the short time that I had left, I imme-

diately began to prepare for my Bar-Mitzvah as we had planned before I went into hiding. It was the first Bar-Mitzvah since the Liberation to be celebrated in the Ashkenazi synagogue of which my father had become the rabbi. It was a momentous occasion for the Jews of Nice who had succeeded in saving their lives. I also entered the Lycée Masséna in Nice.

The OSE continued its activities in Nice for the benefit of the children. We participated in the numerous events it organized upon various occasions. During the summer of 1945, the organization sent us to camp. I have pleasant memories of that vacation for I felt that this time I was leaving my parents in "happy circumstances."

We became French citizens. I graduated from the Lycée Masséna and passed the French Baccalaureate examinations. Eventually, my family decided to move to the United States. I continued my Jewish and secular studies at Yeshiva University and was ordained as a rabbi. I did my graduate work in French literature at Yale University and became a professor of French.

In retrospect, I always considered myself fortunate, especially when I compare myself to the children who suffered more than I did, those who did not find their parents when they returned from their hiding places, those who were deported themselves, those who never came back. ■

1. I wish to thank Professor Simon Schwarzfuchs of Bar-Ilan University (Israel) for having called my attention to a document written in Hebrew and Italian where the communal leaders and rabbis of Nice express their gratitude to Mr. Alberto Calisse, the Italian consul in Nice at the time, for having extended his protection to the Jews of Nice and the region that was under Italian occupation. This document bears the signatures of these people and, among them, that of my father. I also want to thank Mr. Serge Klarsfeld, author of *Le Mémorial de la déportation des juifs de France*, for making available to me a copy of the original of this document. On this subject, see also the book by Daniel Karpi, *Beyn Chevet Lechesed*, Jerusalem, The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1993, pp. 184, note 1, 185.

2. On the activities of Mr. Moussa Abadi and Monsignor Rémond on behalf of the children hidden in the city and the region of Nice during that period, see the book by Ralph Schor, *Un évêque dans le siècle: Monseigneur Paul Rémond (1873-1963)*, Editions Serre, 1984, pp. 117-121. See also the novel by Joseph Joffo, *Un sac de billes*, and *Dictionnaire des Justes de France*, Lucien Lazare ed., Jerusalem, Yad Vashem & Paris, Fayard, 2003, pp. 483-484.

3. I want to thank Professor G  rald Dardart of the University Paris IV-Sorbonne and historian of the Ardennes for having made available to me detailed biographical information concerning Pierre and Andr  e Vi  not. The name of Pierre Vi  not also appears in the opening pages of General De Gaulle's *Memoirs*.

4. Professor Schwarzfuchs also found in the archives of the "Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine" the forms of "Family Reunification" concerning my brother and me, where my father certifies having "retrieved" us.

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